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EVERYDAY LIFE *in* RUSSIA PAST *and* PRESENT

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Everyday Life in Transnational Perspective

Consumption and Consumerism, 1917–1939

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I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.
—T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, 1920

Love's boat has smashed against the daily grind.
—Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Past One O'clock*, 1930

Amoeba-like lines were straightened out in shops and cafeterias, and an effort was made to unclog the service and distribution process—to this day a major psychic scourge to foreign residents in the Soviet Union.
—Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 1989

Following the revolution of 1917, a sizable community of intrepid Americans, both male and female, traveled to the Soviet Union to report on the birth of a newly emerging civilization. There was an historical reason for this interest, as in the preceding decades scores of writers, journalists, engineers, businessmen, and tourists had toured this vast and strange land called the Russian Empire and recorded their impressions of the people and the civilizations in which those people lived.[1] Travel literature on Russia, both popular and academic, was already an established literary genre, and publishing companies in the United States devoted specialized series to reportage about the empire. The Soviet authorities courted well-known American intellectuals and journalists in the hopes that they would give the revolution a glowing bill of health, and organizations such as the International Association of Revolutionary Writers (MOPR), the All Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign

Countries (VOKS), and subsequently the Foreign Tourist (Intourist) were specifically created by the Soviet government to "manage" the travel experiences of the visitors. While Europeans were equally fascinated by the socialist experiment in the Soviet Union, American visitors soon outnumbered them. Also, American intellectuals, artists, journalists, scholars, and tourists wrote copiously about their Soviet experiences. The flood of publications was so voluminous and influential that during these early decades of the twentieth century the United States emerged as one of the leading centers of knowledge production about the Soviet Union.[2]

Over the years, historians and foreign policy experts have produced many excellent studies on the diplomatic, economic, and intellectual connections between Russia and the United States, and recently the field has been reenergized both by the ending of the Cold War and by the opening of Soviet-era archives.[3] But rather than scrutinize these travel accounts for their historical accuracy in representing conditions in the Soviet Union or probe the ideological inclinations of the travelers and the motivations of their hosts, I will analyze American experiences within the material culture of Soviet socialism from 1917 to the onset of the Second World War in 1939. While writing this essay, I have been strongly influenced by both postcolonial and postsocialist scholarship that has fundamentally retheorized the trope of the cultural encounter in the modern world and forced us to rethink the ways in which the "West" constructs other peoples and produces knowledge about their cultures.[4] But postcolonial scholarship has been more concerned with Western intellectual representations of the Orient and less with the actual conditions of the physical encounter between the traveler and the native, the terrain where lives intertwine and new meanings are generated. For the most part, scholars have evinced little interest in understanding the everyday life experiences within which Western travelers formed their systems of knowledge about others.[5]

In contrast to the previous inattention to the quotidian, I present a coterminous reading of American travel writing about the Soviet Union, one that is grounded in the material conditions of daily life in both empires. Such an approach illuminates the many ways in which petty annoyances, the unfamiliar nature of daily routines in a new country, and the stress of adjusting to alien surroundings color our perspective, influence our judgments, and shape our evaluations of other cultures.

American representations of the Soviet Union were fundamentally shaped by their preconceptions of what should constitute the material conditions of modernity. As such, visiting Americans found it difficult to countenance what they perceived to be a complete disregard for the needs and requirements of the consumer. Travelers criticized the chronic shortages of material goods, the poor quality of food products and consumer goods, the uncomfortable living arrangements, and the hostile attitudes of sales personnel and staff at stores, restaurants, and hotels. Ultimately, even pro-Soviet Americans, those passionately committed to the Bolshevik experiment, had to filter the utopia of their dreams through the fine mesh of what they perceived to be the unnatural "everyday life" of a socialist society. By means of their political commentary and travel writing, Americans established a powerful intellectual framework that contained persuasive rhetorical devices and tropes that described the Soviet system of distribution and consumption. In the eyes of these observers, the Soviet inability to institute the modern practices of a consumer society threw a dark shadow over its other attempts to create a socialist civilization. This evaluative framework, established in the interwar period, had considerable staying power and continues to influence our retrospective judgments about the Soviet Union after its collapse in 1991.

One travels to escape from the realm of the everyday and to abandon the repetitive actions that govern our daily existence. And although the juxtaposition of travel and everyday life appears to be counterintuitive, our exotic journeys to distant places necessarily entail daily rituals that ensure the reproduction of our selves. Bodily experiences are interpreted through cultural codes that govern our existence, but these norms are neither static nor time bound. While American travelers brought a host of cultural assumptions about what should constitute the material culture of modernity, for the most part they were quick to learn the differences between capitalist societies of mass consumption and what they perceived to be socialist deprivation. And within a reasonably short period of time they acquired the everyday skills and ethnographic information necessary to survive "as Americans" within the Soviet socialist system.

Americans learned to stand in line patiently, to barter goods, to bargain for fair prices in the black market, and to stock up on daily necessities in anticipation of shortages. They also became inured to sharing cramped

physical quarters and scarce commodities. Many broke the law as they exchanged foreign currency for rubles on the black market.[6] As they mastered the Soviet practices of using *sviazi* (connections) as well as *blat* (judicious gift giving) in order to procure housing, summer dachas, travel and work permits, and food and drink, they also began to appreciate the power of the state.[7] They soon learned to regard influential Soviet bureaucrats as significant sources of material largesse and cultural patronage. These skills of survival were often shared among their fellow Americans and other Westerners as a sort of oral lore, rarely systematized, but recorded laconically in travel accounts.[8] The travel knowledge that Americans acquired while negotiating the terrain of Soviet socialism was translated into metaphors and images used to describe the material culture of the Soviet Union. American commentators, both on the right and the left, perceived everyday life in the Soviet Union as fundamentally anomalous, as devoid of moral and ethical meaning even for the native inhabitants of the Soviet Union, and for the most part they represented Soviet consumption and retail practices as an aberrational form of modernity.[9]

THE AMERICAN CONSUMER REVOLUTION AND SOCIALIST CONSUMPTION

While framing the Soviet-American encounter, one must remember that the two civilizations were also representatives of two radically new regimes of consumption in world history. In the early twentieth century, the United States was beginning to experience the full flood of the modern consumer revolution. Although easy credit was yet to reach significant sections of working-class households, comparatively high wages and installment payment plans enabled workers to buy mass-produced goods such as labor-saving appliances, disposable articles of personal hygiene, ready-made clothing, canned and packaged food, radios, and even automobiles. During this period, large corporations as well as the U.S. government were concerned with promoting the purchasing power of American consumers. Town planners emphasized the building of suburban homes large enough to furnish them with consumer goods, and new suburban communities were built with convenient access to shopping centers. By

the late 1920s, half of American homes had indoor plumbing, and a third had access to electricity.

Chain variety stores and large department stores such as Woolworth's, Macy's, and Filene's created new norms of consumerism by means of commercial advertising in print and film media. The Sears & Roebuck mail-order business, a milestone in the new consumer culture, delivered coveted goods to the more remote parts of the country. American cities developed massive spaces for the merchandizing of goods, larger in scope than the more genteel shopping arcades and department stores established in Paris, Milan, London, and St. Petersburg during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Department stores offered what was until then considered the unimaginable: goods of standardized quality and a guaranteed return policy if they were found defective. Rising living standards in the United States, coupled with a massive influx of imported goods, meant that American consumers had unprecedented access to a dazzling array of goods from around the world.

The U.S. government and the Bureau of Commerce helped with the distribution of goods that American factories were producing in ever-increasing quantities by building roads and highways, promoting railroad construction, controlling labor unions, and creating a highly efficient postal system that helped mail-order businesses. Aggressive imperial policies, market penetration by large American corporations, and the evangelism of Protestant missionaries in the Caribbean, Central America, South America, the Pacific Islands, and parts of Asia helped spread the American norms of consumption beyond the Western Hemisphere.[10] From the 1910s onward European notions of high bourgeois consumption were soon challenged by the onslaught of American goods, services, and what American marketing experts called "best practices." The idea of a democratic polity that was based on facilitating mass access to ever-widening spheres of material consumption was finding purchase in American society at large and would soon make significant inroads in Europe, especially during the postwar era.[11]

Scholars have challenged our twentieth-century notions of the consumer as a politically passive and socially alienated individual who is taught to desire commercial products and services through blatant propaganda and manipulative advertising.[12] They have argued that through

much of American history, and especially during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, citizens expressed their civic consciousness and political engagement through acts of consumption and by organizing associations of consumers and consumer activists. Activists and consumer leagues protested against unfair labor practices and unsafe and unsanitary products, and they leveraged their buying power as consumers to force changes in the politics of production.[13] Members of the Progressive movement such as labor unionists, journalists, academics, consumer activists, socialists, and religious groups, while deeply critical of untrammeled industrialization, fought for the expansion of individual wealth and consumption rather than the nationalization of private property.[14]

Progressives and their political heirs demanded the creation of a welfare state that would enable a more equitable distribution of goods and resources among the various social classes rather than the dismantling of the American system of privatized industrial production and mass consumption. As Edmund Wilson observed rather wistfully, "It is probably impossible for an American . . . to imagine Russia correctly . . . and if he is an advocate of socialism and a reader of 'U.S.S.R. in Construction,' he is likely to imagine the Soviet Union as simply the United States plus his ideal of socialism."[15] Americans, as avid consumers of mass-produced goods, accustomed to the standardized conveniences of a rapidly modernizing economy, and schooled in the notion that the customer is always right, trained a set of culturally coded lenses on Soviet material conditions.

The Soviet Union transitioned from a mixed aristocratic/bourgeois regime of consumption among the elites and an emerging consumer economy based primarily in the cities to state control of production, distribution, and consumption. In the imperial period the bulk of the peasant households had limited engagement with the market except for the purchase of kerosene, matches, tobacco, and sometimes vodka. While the thrifty Russian peasant bought few ready-made goods, articles of mass consumption such as cigarettes, soap, bottled beer, and cheap books were beginning to feature in worker households in the cities in the early twentieth century.[16] As recent historiography has demonstrated, the intelligentsia's aversion to the market served to strengthen the Bolshevik predilection for state control of the economy.[17] From 1918 to 1927 the state made fitful attempts to control the market, and there was an uneasy Bolshevik coexistence with

the private retail sector, the black market, and the essentially privately owned peasant economy. But with the Stalinist revolution the state gained control of larger sectors of the economy and sought to institute a modern system of socialist distribution and consumption. The collapse of the private retail system led to the rationing of bread and other daily necessities during the First Five-Year Plan. During this period, there was widespread deprivation, enormous scarcity of food and consumer products in the cities, and starvation and even famine in the countryside. The black market, which had served visiting foreigners so well in the 1920s, was drastically limited; instead, Americans were steered toward the Torgsin (*Torgovlia s inostrantsami*, 1931–36) stores.[18] These expensive state-run stores sold groceries, clothing, antiques, and artworks for foreign currency only. Other shopping venues included the Insnab (*Inostranets snabzheniie*), which were created in 1932 for foreign workers and specialists. Visiting journalists and intellectuals also seemed to have access to *kommissionyi* stores for secondhand goods and antiques.

Rationing was officially ended with the inception of the Second Five-Year Plan, and there was a concerted effort to increase production of foodstuffs and consumer goods and create sites of cultured socialist consumption such as cafés, emporiums, and opulent Gastronom food department stores in Moscow and Leningrad. The production of clothes, shoes, and furniture increased, and there was even a drive to mass-produce luxury items such as caviar, chocolates, champagne, and gramophones. In the quest for social distinction, Soviet women were encouraged to dress well, acquire permanents and manicures, and even decorate their apartments with tasteful knickknacks.[19] But, as we know, Americans, even working-class ones who fled the Depression-era United States for employment in the USSR, reported on the massive shortages of consumer goods and food items in the Soviet Union. American dissatisfaction with Soviet retail and distribution systems transcended class affiliations, as both elite and working-class travelers were astounded by the myriad inconveniences that seemed to be embedded in the very system. Fellow travelers and those sympathetic to socialism were hard-pressed to understand and explain why unemployed workers in the depression-ridden countries of Western Europe and the United States dressed better and had higher living standards than their Soviet counterparts.[20]

Bertha Markoosha Fischer, returning émigrée and avid partisan of the Russian Revolution, while acknowledging the increased availability of consumer goods and services during the 1930s, still felt that the supply never was commensurate with the demand.[21] In her letters to her husband, the well-known journalist Louis Fischer, she complained bitterly about the lack of food and basic medicines for children. While she bought expensive butter and vegetables for her two sons, she herself subsisted on a diet of cheap kasha. She repeatedly begged Fischer to bring chocolates, face cream, stockings, and children's clothes from the United States.[22] Markoosha Fischer's correspondence is an interesting compendium of political commentary on the achievements of the revolutionary state interlaced with diatribes against the conditions of daily life in the Soviet Union. In a letter dated August 9, 1929, Markoosha Fischer confessed that the problems of daily life, the lack of good food and warm clothes, and the limited access to medical care were preventing her from sustaining a larger vision of the communist revolution.

While American visitors were frustrated by the living conditions in the Soviet Union, they admired party efforts to create a welfare state that included massive expenditures on institutions of art and culture. Fischer, despite her many complaints, constantly saw plays and ballets and reveled in her social life in Moscow. In a letter dated February 14, 1931, she confessed that she didn't want to travel back to the United States with her husband: "But I fear America. I am so different from all your friends over there, I hate those parties, and the eternal conversations about sex and marriage and all the things which are so settled and done with (wrong or right) by us. And life seems so flat there."[23]

Americans were particularly drawn to the artistic innovations and lively cultural life in the Soviet Union that existed despite the omnipresent censorship and repression. Once in the United States, returning travelers became vocal proponents of state subsidy for the arts.[24] State funding for the arts, cultural production, and higher education was still rare in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s, and philanthropic organizations such as the Carnegie Foundation and subsequently the Rockefeller Foundation were just beginning to fund research in the social sciences and the humanities. During the New Deal the Roosevelt administration employed artists, musicians, actors, and intellectuals through five organiza-

tions that were administered by the Works Progress Administration, but due to political unpopularity, these were scaled back considerably in 1939 and officially ended in 1942. Even while they deplored the heavy-handed Soviet censorship, American travelers realized that the state had an important role to play in the production and preservation of culture, as well as in the creation and maintenance of an intelligentsia. Edmund Wilson, Theodore Dreiser, and Eugene Lyons, among others, perceptively noted that the privileges of journalists and intellectuals in the Soviet Union were primarily material ones and that Soviet intellectuals had access to better standards of housing, clothes, food, vacation homes and clubs, and cars.

THE KNOWLEDGE NECESSARY TO SURVIVE EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE SOVIET UNION

In the late imperial era, American travelers had been favorably impressed by the efficient travel amenities, the extensive choice of consumer goods, and the excellent quality of food in the Russian Empire.[25] The themes of an exuberant Russian hospitality and the overabundance of food and drinks pervade the pages of the American travel literature from the imperial era. After the revolution of 1917, while Russians retained their famed hospitality, much of the American writing about Soviet Russia described the absence of food, the search for food, and the shared strategies of food procurement. Americans suffered greatly while sojourning in revolutionary Russia, and the concern with food and complaints about bodily discomfort were omnipresent in the texts. Most Americans, even the ones sympathetic to the revolution, complained of hunger, cold weather, inadequate heating, faulty plumbing, and pervasive filth. Food prices rose during the years of civil war, and one paid exorbitant prices for skimpy and tasteless meals. Visitors to the Soviet Union packed large stores of canned food in anticipation of hunger and privations.[26]

Travel in the Soviet Union produced new rituals of food consumption and encouraged the pooling of resources among visitors. And increasingly through much of the twentieth century, Americans often became sources of food and consumer goods for their Soviet friends. As the Civil War progressed, Americans found themselves in privileged positions compared

to their beleaguered hosts. While the massive American relief operations that Herbert Hoover instituted in 1921 to deal with the aftermath of the famine have been well documented, we know little about the countless instances of American generosity and kindness or how these acts were interpreted by their hosts. Frank Golder, noted historian and archivist, trudged two miles in the snow to anonymously deliver packages of white flour, tea, sugar, rice, and other scarce food products to impoverished friends in Moscow on a cold Christmas morning in 1921.[27]

To some observers the romance of the revolution often trumped the unbearable conditions of everyday life in Soviet Russia, and these material privations were understood as necessary consequences of war and revolution. John Reed, famous journalist and left-wing activist, in his worldwide best seller, *Ten Days That Shook the World,* enthusiastically celebrated the ability of Russian workers to ignore hunger pangs and endure cold and continuous sleep deprivation in their quest to build a revolution. In fact, Reed made a concerted effort to remake himself as a Bolshevik, as someone who bore extended prison sentences uncomplainingly and was ready to give his life for the cause of the revolution.[28] But Reed was extraordinary in his dedication and his ability to rise above the quotidian. Another left-leaning idealist, the famous dancer Isadora Duncan, realized that she would never develop the requisite Bolshevik stoicism in the face of deprivation. And even John Scott, in his classic account of Magnitogorsk, reported with palpable relief on improvements in living conditions during the Second Five-Year Plan and the wider availability of consumer goods.[29]

In the 1920s American visitors complained continually of the poor service at the hotels in Moscow, the ubiquity of bedbugs, and the unsanitary bathrooms, and they criticized the monotonous and unappetizing meals.[30] Even a hardcore idealist such as Isadora Duncan, who migrated to the Soviet Union in the hopes that the Soviet government would help her found a school for orphaned children, was severely disillusioned by the conditions. Duncan went to the Soviet Union with the firm belief that through the medium of dance she would fashion Soviet children into citizens of a socialist world order. Her fascination with the Soviets stemmed from a disdain for what she claimed was a shallow, profit-minded, and materialistic bourgeois culture where the artist had to prostitute herself in order to perform her art. Duncan's flight to Russia was intended to be a grand

gesture of renunciation of the material world and a rededication of her art to the common people. Ignoring dire warnings of hunger and misery in Russia, she arrived with her adopted daughter and a French maid(!) in 1921.

As soon as Duncan entered the Soviet Union, the talk about art and revolution was subsumed under a narrow concern with the quotidian. Duncan's account reads like a cautionary tale to other starry-eyed idealists who mistakenly believed that it was possible for the spirit to triumph over the flesh. Upon her arrival in Moscow, Duncan and her entourage found that the Soviet government had forgotten to send them an escort or even arrange for a hotel. The rooms at the Savoy Hotel were poorly furnished, and while they lacked pillows and bed linen, they contained an abundance of flies and rats.[31] Coffee was hard to find, and soon Duncan and her entourage were thinking longingly of New York, London, or Paris, where coffee with fresh cream was readily available.[32] When Duncan was invited to spend a week at the country cottage of a dedicated Russian communist, she discovered that she could not bear to sleep on the floor, drink goat's milk, or eat the rough food that was offered.[33] Wandering in the cold, rainy, Moscow weather with a communist, she said, "I found, after meeting others, that a real communist is indifferent to heat or cold or hunger or any material sufferings. As the early Christian martyrs, they live so entirely in ideas that they simply don't notice these things."[34]

Another sympathetic traveler, Margaret Bourke-White, associate editor of *Fortune* magazine and an ardent advocate of labor rights, created a stunning visual record of the First Five-Year Plan with her glamorous photographs of Soviet industrialization.[35] Although VOKS officials privately condemned her work as superficial, they also realized that Bourke-White's photographs broadcast favorable images of the Soviet Union to a global public. But in her travel narrative she continuously contrasted American plenitude with Soviet scarcity, never once acknowledging the impact of the Depression in the United States or the widespread existence of hunger and poverty. Bourke-White noted that shoes were rarely to be found in the Soviet Union, ice cream was a precious commodity, and chocolate was simply unavailable. Bourke-White, who never ate sweets in the United States, developed an absolute craving for sugar, and whenever she found it, she would devour it on the spot. Early in her account, her interpreter, Lydia

Petrovna, asked her why American women dieted. As the two women shared monotonous meals comprised mostly of American cans of baked beans, which Bourke-White provided, Lydia was hard-pressed to imagine a world where women suffered hunger by choice. Indeed, the concept of self-imposed hunger must have seemed particularly obscene in the context of the widespread famine that resulted from the collectivization of the Soviet countryside.

Bourke-White, like other American visitors, realized that when the availability of food was not guaranteed, it became an important and precious resource. And the act of eating, when enacted in a communal and convivial manner, acquired a deep cultural significance that it had lacked back home. At a party with young Russians, Bourke-White realized that her hosts had saved their meager rations for weeks in order to provide a special snack of crackers and wine. In the Soviet Union she realized that the ease of life in the United States, with its widespread availability of food, clean water, and communication services, was actually an anomaly and not the norm. When returning to "civilization," Bourke-White confessed that on the train to Berlin she managed to consume eight eggs at one sitting. Stories such as these established an important trope of the widespread scarcity of goods and provisions within the Soviet system.

While shopping for food and necessities became extremely difficult during the Soviet era, the collapsed state of the Soviet economy allowed visiting Americans unprecedented access to luxury goods and artworks. Not only could Americans shop at special hard currency Soviet stores, they also purchased lavishly on the black market and funneled a brisk transatlantic trade in imperial art and artifacts. Margaret Bourke-White proudly reported in 1931 that she picked up a sixteenth-century icon for a fraction of its value, and she managed to smuggle it out of the country.[36] Joseph Davies, American ambassador to the Soviet Union, and his wife, Marjorie Post, heiress in her own right, acquired a large collection of Russian art and antiques from the kommissionnyi stores and art museums with the help of conniving Soviet authorities.[37] At the other end of the spectrum there was a deep Soviet fascination with ordinary American articles of consumption, such as ready-made clothes, stockings, canned food, candy, and chocolates. Indeed, American identity became inextricably tied to the possession of articles of mass consumption. However,

in the Soviet context these were not viewed as disposable goods but as articles that had innate value. Lydia Petrovna asked Bourke-White for the rims around food cans, which she then ingeniously turned into a bracelet. After leaving the Soviet Union, Bourke-White sent back a real gold bracelet for Lydia Petrovna so that she could wear it instead of the bracelet fashioned from cans of baked beans.

Ella Winter, left-leaning journalist and wife of the famous radical Lincoln Steffens, candidly acknowledged: "Not all the young people in the USSR have the disregard for material welfare that most young communists show. Girls especially feel the lack of goods intensely. They want nice clothes, good cosmetics, silk stockings. They envy foreigners. Some have developed an almost pathological desire for the good-quality clothes that they have been deprived of. I have had them feel feverishly my foreign clothes, hat, frock, sample the material, stroke the silk, almost pull my underwear from under my blouse in their frenzied hunger."[38] The journalist Anne O'Hare McCormick was besieged by women wanting to know "where they could duplicate an old American tailored suit or a pair of shoes bought in a Balkan town."[39] And Markoosha Fischer wrote that she could have made money by conducting people through her household, which was furnished with cheap American devices that her husband had brought back from the United States: "A hook which did not get rusty from humidity, a new can opener, a potato peeler, a dish cloth which did not discolor—these never ceased to arouse the amazement of our Soviet visitors."[40] American travel narratives at these moments read like orientalist European accounts that contrasted naive natives with the more sophisticated and civilized travelers.[41] And like the colonial literature, American representations of Soviet material poverty and hunger for consumer goods played an important political function during the twentieth century.

STATE PATRONAGE

While Ludmilla Stern and David Caute have accused the Soviet government of bribing American intellectuals with royalties from translations, large lecture tours, lavish dinners, and well-organized excursions, files from both VOKS and Intourist tell the other part of the story.[42] The

correspondence from both organizations contains detailed requests by visiting Americans for tickets to theaters and concerts, excursions to various Soviet institutions and museums, fully funded trips to different parts of the country, access to research materials, employment opportunities, and requests for room and board while sojourning in the Soviet Union.[43] While VOKS understood the value of gaining favorable publicity through the medium of these important dignitaries, and thus most of the requests were granted, at the same time there was a cynical awareness that foreigners often feigned enthusiasm for the achievements of the Soviet state while visiting the country and then displayed intense anti-Soviet sentiments when back in their own countries.[44] Theodore Dreiser, the famous American writer, represented a classic case of the Soviet quandary.[45]

Dreiser was initially invited to attend the commemoration of the tenth year of the October Revolution in 1928, but he stayed on for several months afterward and traveled extensively through the country. Dreiser signed a generous contract for the translation of his works into Russian and was guaranteed substantial royalties. But Dreiser was not an easy guest, and he complained loudly and vociferously to Olga Kameneva, the head of VOKS, about the terrible travel conditions and poor amenities in the Soviet Union. Dreiser subsequently wrote about his experiences in a book entitled *Dreiser Looks at Russia*.[46] However, once he returned to the United States, Dreiser became an ardent defender of the Soviet Union, and his articles and books facilitated the flow of American tourists to the Soviet Union.[47]

We become aware of Dreiser's suffering very early in his narrative, and as he travels around the Soviet Union, he appears completely oblivious to the fact that the country had just experienced the depredations of the First World War, a bloody civil war, allied military intervention, an international blockade, and a complete breakdown of industrial and agricultural production. The greater Russian tragedy is eclipsed by the minute descriptions of his travails. He avers, "Never have I seen a land more poorly equipped with the aids and ways and means of . . . comforting the citizen or the traveler" (56). He complains bitterly about the lack of cleanliness, which is so un-American, and he believes that it has less to do with poverty than with a general Russian unconcern with hygiene (59). He makes repeated references to "stocky sweaty smelly bodies" and the "half-stifling

Asiatic odor" that pervades the wretched houses of the peasants (84, 133). The furnishings in Soviet hotel rooms are threadbare, the bed linen is insufficient, bathtubs and washstands are unavailable, and the water is invariably cold (60). When Dreiser is invited to the house of Eisenstein, one of the most brilliant and influential film directors of the twentieth century, upon entry he is helplessly fixated by Eisenstein's bed: "I remarked that he had the largest and most comfortable looking bed that I had seen in Russia, and I envied him the same, I having thus far seen only narrow and most uncomfortable looking ones" (206). Eisenstein explains that he had bought the bed from an American farming commune near Moscow.

Dreiser is even surprised that Tolstoy, the Russian apostle of antimaterialism, lived in such simplicity at Yasnaia Poliana and that his dressing gown was of such poor quality. And in general, Dreiser has little to say about Tolstoy's literature and focuses almost exclusively on the spartan and uncomfortable surroundings that Tolstoy inhabited (210). He is savagely critical of Soviet restaurants, the poor furniture, and the mismatched clothes of the patrons, and he even claims that "there is almost no such thing as good cooking in Soviet Russia" (63). Finally, what upsets Dreiser the most is the sight of a hearse in a funeral procession that carries an open casket: "For all you can think of now is why not a box of sufficient depth, in an enclosed hearse? And reticence? Seclusion? Evasion of this gruesome thing even though it must be?" (240). Dreiser seems unable to contemplate life stripped to its bare essentials, human bodily functions rendered transparent in communal kitchens and shared bathrooms, devoid of the aesthetic privacy of bourgeois civilization.

But what makes this travel account so fascinating is not simply its parochial and even orientalist condemnation of another civilization. Dreiser in his narrative simultaneously engages in critiquing American culture or the lack thereof. Even as he bemoans the absence of physical comfort in Soviet Russia, Dreiser, like John Reed, Isadora Duncan, and Bertha Markoosha Fischer, praises the Russian capacity for abstract thought and intellectual discourse. Dreiser uses the intellectuality of Russians as a stick with which to belabor his fellow Americans. He criticizes the American obsession with materialism and comments on the indifference of his fellow citizens to art and culture. Thus he writes: "For we are so wholly materialistic, so in the main, utterly puerile mentally. But in Russia, how different! God the swish and talk of actual, serious, generous, non-material, highly spiritual mentation!" (260). Dreiser's travel writing has a didactic intent: it is intended to goad the bourgeois audience at home to slough off their cocoon of prosperity and engage more seriously in the realm of the intellect. It is the traditional lament of the American intelligentsia, their complaints about being isolated in a culture of Babbittry and materialism. But Dreiser's obsessive concern with his own physical discomfort while traveling in the Soviet Union ends up valorizing the very system he tries to critique in America.

While Dreiser was seemingly impervious to the complicated arrangements that were made to ensure his comfort,[48] other American travelers in the 1930s became increasingly conscious of their own privileged position in the Soviet Union, as well as the political compromises that they sometimes had to make in order to benefit from the state-sanctioned system of rewards. Walter Duranty, Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist for the *New York Times*, possibly maintained his luxurious lifestyle in Moscow, assisted by a team of assistants and servants, by justifying Stalinist policies of collectivization and industrialization to audiences in the West.[49] But others such as Eugene Lyons and Louis Fischer increasingly grew pessimistic about the vitality of the Soviet revolution.[50] It was not only the repressive tactics of the Stalinist regime, the brutal methods of collectivization, and the attendant famine that made them question their previous idealism. They were also deeply perturbed by the growing inequality and the desperation engendered by unequal access to food that they witnessed in the Soviet countryside in the 1930s. Paradoxically, as material conditions improved in the Soviet Union, visiting Americans became even more critical about the debased quality of the living conditions of the masses of workers and peasants and contrasted it negatively with the elite lifestyles of members of the party, the Red Army, the security services, and the intelligentsia.[51]

CONCLUSION

American travel literature on everyday living conditions in the Soviet Union reveals several narrative strategies. In the first and the most obvious reading through the sources, I found conspicuous use of orientalist language, which travelers used to criticize the poor quality of goods

and services and the difficult and burdensome living conditions.[52] These graphic accounts effectively conveyed the inadequacies of the socialist retail and distribution system to a large English-speaking public throughout the world. The islands of material privilege that the travelers described were further proof that the socialist ideals of equality were being perverted in the Soviet Union. American travelers also were increasingly guilt-stricken that their own material resources were far greater than those of their hosts, and this led to the creation of complicated social relationships and tensions with Russian friends and colleagues.[53] At the same time, Americans were forced to rely increasingly on the Soviet state to ensure their own comfort while traveling in the Soviet Union. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Western travelers availed themselves of hotels, guesthouses, apartments, free excursions, and subsidized trips to the theater and museums. They also employed servants to stand in line at stores, take care of household needs, drive their cars, and babysit their children.[54] They shopped at special stores and frequented the large hotels in Moscow, especially the bar at the Metropole, which served excellent food and featured beautiful barmaids willing to dance with foreigners. While perceptive Americans noted the ways in which citizens of the Soviet Union suffered within the system, accommodated themselves to the myriad inconveniences that it inflicted on them, and on occasion even benefited from it, by and large Americans saw the socialist system as an abnormal state of affairs, validated neither by the new consumerism they themselves had experienced at home nor by the capitalist mode of human interactions.[55]

While political affiliation dictated American reactions to both the Bolshevik revolution and Stalinist policies, most travelers, whether on the left or on the right, evinced a deep concern with the physical suffering that they witnessed while traveling in the Soviet Union. Those on the right cited the terrible material conditions of Soviet existence to advocate a return to capitalism and what they considered to be a natural economic order. They argued that without the right to private property, an individual was helpless in the face of the oppressive power of the state. More pragmatic advocates of modernization initially believed that despite the hardships imposed by state-sponsored industrialization and collectivization, these policies would ultimately bring material prosperity to the masses. When this failed to materialize, even erstwhile fellow travelers

such as William Chamberlin, Eugene Lyons, and Louis Fischer assumed an anti-Stalinist position.

The narratives of those sympathetic to leftist ideology performed a double function. Observers such as John Reed and Theodore Dreiser praised Russian spirituality and the Russian capacity to subordinate the needs of the individual to the imaginative demands of a communitarian future. But even as they commemorated the indomitable Bolshevik spirit and ability to rise above the quotidian, their subtext of physical hardships often captured the attention of American readers.

Descriptions of endless lines, the search for daily bread and sausage, cramped living quarters, unhygienic communal kitchens and bathrooms, ubiquitous bedbugs, rude attendants in stores and hotels, and the lack of soap and toilet paper: these were memorable pictures of the Soviet Union that stayed in the American public memory.[56] The emphasis on bodily discomfort in Soviet Russia was so pervasive a trope in American travel literature that it found its way into popular culture through films such as *Ninotchka* (1939), *Comrade X* (1940), and *Silk Stockings* (1957). The impossible conditions of daily life were featured prominently in movies, jokes, and fiction about the Soviet Union. In the American imagination, Soviet material culture and everyday life represented a grotesque distortion of modernity. Images of the Soviet other helped legitimize American modes of consumerism and consumption through much of the twentieth century. Above all, negative references to socialist means of distribution normalized conceptions of a world political order based on safeguarding the rights of consumers rather than protecting the interests of the producers. Ultimately, American standards of consumption, which had acquired global significance in the latter part of the twentieth century, played a major role in hastening the demise of the Soviet Union and the socialist world.[57]

NOTES

1. John Gaddis, *Russia, the Soviet Union and the United States: An Interpretive History* (New York: Wiley, 1978); A. V. Golubev et al., eds., *Rossiia i zapad: Formirovanie vneshnepoliticheskikh stereotipov v soznanii rossiiskogo obshchestva pervoi poloviny XX veka* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999); Sergei Zhuravlev, *"Malen'kie liudi" i "bol'shaia istoriia":*

Inostrantsy moskovskogo Elektrozavoda v sovetskom obshchestve 1920-x-1930-xgg (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2000).

2. Peter Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment, 1917–1933* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967); David Foglesong, *The American Mission and the "Evil Empire": The Crusade for a Free Russia since 1881* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

3. David Charles Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1929–1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

4. Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, "Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 1 (2009): 6–39; Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of Enlightenment* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994).

5. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

6. See James E. Abbe, *I Photograph Russia* (New York: R. M. McBride and Co., 1935), 78–79.

7. Anthropologist Alena V. Ledeneva explained *blat* as "the use of personal networks for obtaining goods and services in short supply and for circumventing formal procedures" (*How Russia Really Works: The Informal Practices That Shaped Post-Soviet Politics and Business* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006], 1).

8. Frank Costigliola, "'The Invisible Wall': Personal and Cultural Origins of the Cold War," *New England Journal of History* 64, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 190–213; "'Unceasing Pressure for Penetration': Gender, Pathology and Emotion in George Kennan's Formation," *Journal of American History* 83, no. 4 (March 1997): 1309–39.

9. While André Gide in his infamous tract *Return from the U.S.S.R.* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1937) was also critical of the quality of Russian food products and consumer goods, he was intellectually supportive of the socialist system of production and distribution (19–22).

10. Emily Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890–1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); Frank Ninkovich, *Global Dawn: The Cultural Foundations of American Internationalism, 1865–1890* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).

11. William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003); Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

12. Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Modern Library, 1912); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964). See also Martyn J. Lee, ed., *The Consumer Society Reader* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000) for a range of critical theories on consumption and consumerism.

13. T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Lawrence B. Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

14. Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997).

15. Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1936), 162.

16. Peter Gatrell, *The Tsarist Economy, 1850–1917* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986); Paul Gregory, *An Economic History of Russia: From Emancipation to the First Five Year Plan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); Margery Hilton, *Selling to the Masses: Retailing in Russia, 1880–1930* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012).

17. Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); Lars Lih, *Bread of Authority in Russia, 1914–1921* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

18. Elena Osokina, *Zoloto dlia industrializatsii: TORGSIN* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2009).

19. Jukka Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of Good Life in Stalinist Russia* (New York: Berg, 2003); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); Julie Hessler, *A Social History of Soviet Trade Policy, Retail Practices and Consumption, 1917–1953* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); Elena Osokina, *Our Daily Bread: Socialist Distribution and the Art of Survival in Stalin's Russia, 1927–1941* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2001); Amy Randall, *Soviet Dream World of Retail, Trade and Consumption in the 1930s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

20. Mary Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia: An American Woman Looks Back* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); John Scott, *Behind the Urals in Russia's City of Steel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

21. Bertha Markoosha Fischer, *My Lives in Russia* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1944), 113.

22. Box 41, folder 1, correspondence from 1929 to 1931, Louis Fischer Papers, Mudd Library, Princeton University.

23. Ibid.

24. Lynn Mally, "The Americanization of the Soviet Living Newspaper," in *Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 1903 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 1–40.

25. Isabel Hapgood, *Russian Rambles* (New York: Arno Press, 1970); Edna Dean Proctor, *A Russian Journey* (Boston: J. R. Osgood and Co., 1872).

26. Choi Chatterjee, "Odds and Ends of the Russian Revolution: Gender and American Travel Narratives of 1917," *Journal of Women's History*, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 10–33.

27. Frank A. Golder, "Christmas, 1921," *Independent*, December 24, 1927, 626; Bernard Patenaude, *The Big Show in Bololand: The American Relief Administration and the Famine of 1921* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002).

28. John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Eric Homberger, *John Reed* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1990).

29. Scott, *Behind the Urals*.

30. George Sylvester Viereck, "Russia Marks Time," *Saturday Evening Post*, November 30, 1929, 14–15, 94.

31. See also Dorothy Thompson, *The New Russia* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1928), 24–27.

32. Irma Duncan and Allan Ross MacDougal, *Isadora Duncan's Russian Days and Her Last Years in France* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), 28–29.

33. Ibid., 67–70.

34. Ibid., 35.

35. Margaret Bourke-White, *Eyes on Russia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931).

36. James Abbe, the first to photograph Stalin, traded his wife's silk stockings for an heirloom samovar. *I Photograph Russia*, 316.

37. Robert C. Williams, *Russian Art and American Money, 1900–1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980); Anne Odom and Wendy Salmond, eds., *Treasures into Tractors: The Selling of Russia's Cultural Heritage, 1918–1938* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

38. Ella Winter, *Red Virtue* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1933), 45.

39. Anne O'Hare McCormick, *The Hammer and the Scythe* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1928), 35.

40. Markoosha Fischer, *My Lives in Russia*, 113. Pro-Soviet fellow traveler Lamont Corliss reported that a Russian barber thought his very "ordinary American comb is so superior that he wants to buy it" (Lamont Corliss and Margot Corliss, *Russia by Day: A Travel Diary* [New York: Covici, Friede, 1933], 233).

41. See Aleksandr Etkind, *Tolkovanie puteshestvii: Rossiia i Amerika v travelogakh i intertekstakh* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2001).

42. David Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers: Intellectual Friends of Communism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988); Ludmila Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–1940: From Red Square to Left Bank* (London: Routledge, 2007).

43. State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), fond 5283 (VOKS), op. 3, d. 66 contains numerous letters from Americans to Olga Kameneva.

44. GARF, fond 5283, op. 8, d. 158, ll. 1–5 (Otdela priema inostrantsev za 1932 g).

45. Michael David-Fox, "Troinaia dvusmyslennost': Teodor Draizer v sovetskoi Rossii (1927–1928): Palomnichestvo, pokhozhee na obvinitel'nuiu rech'," in *Kul'turnye issledovaniia, ed.* Alexander Etkind and Pavel Lysakov (St. Petersburg: Evropeiskii Universitet, 2006), 290–319.

46. Theodore Dreiser, *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (New York: H. Liveright, 1928). Hereafter cited in the text.

47. Norman Saul, *Friends or Foes? The United States and Russia 1921–1941* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 193–97.

48. Ruth Kennel, *Theodore Dreiser and the Soviet Union, 1927–1945* (New York: International Publishers, 1969).

49. Walter Duranty, *I Write as I Please* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1935); James W. Crowl, *Angels in Stalin's Paradise* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982).

50. Eugene Lyons, *Assignment in Utopia* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1991); Richard Crossman, ed., *The God That Failed* (New York: Harper, 1949).

51. Louis Fischer, *Life and Death of Stalin* (New York: Harper, 1952), 77, 130–32.

52. While orientalism is commonly used to refer to European descriptions of the Middle East and Asia during the colonial period, Larry Wolff and Aleksandr Etkind have thoughtfully refashioned Edward Said's formulations in their analysis of Western descriptions of Russia. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of Enlightenment* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994); Etkind, *Tolkovanie puteshestvii.* See also Maria Todorova's excellent work in this vein, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

53. Barbara Walker, "Pollution and Purification in the Moscow Human Rights Networks of the 1960s and 1970s," *Slavic Review* 68, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 376–95.

54. Linton Wells, *Blood on the Moon: The Autobiography of Linton Wells* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1937), 333–56.

55. According to Elena Osokina, left-wing foreign workers, engineers, and specialists were equally disenchanted with Soviet living conditions (*Our Daily Bread*, 82–101).

56. African American writer and poet Langston Hughes wrote that Lincoln Steffens advised him to take soap and toilet paper for himself and silk stockings for the girls for his Soviet journey. See *I Wonder as I Wander* (New York: Rinehart, 1956), 65–66; William Chamberlin, *Russia's Iron Age* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1934), 108–28; Christopher Mari, *No Soap and the Soviet* (Plainfield, N.J.: Red Ram Press, 1936).

57. Slavenka Drakulić, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* (London: Hutchinson, 1992); Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); György Péteri, ed., *Imagining the West in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).